

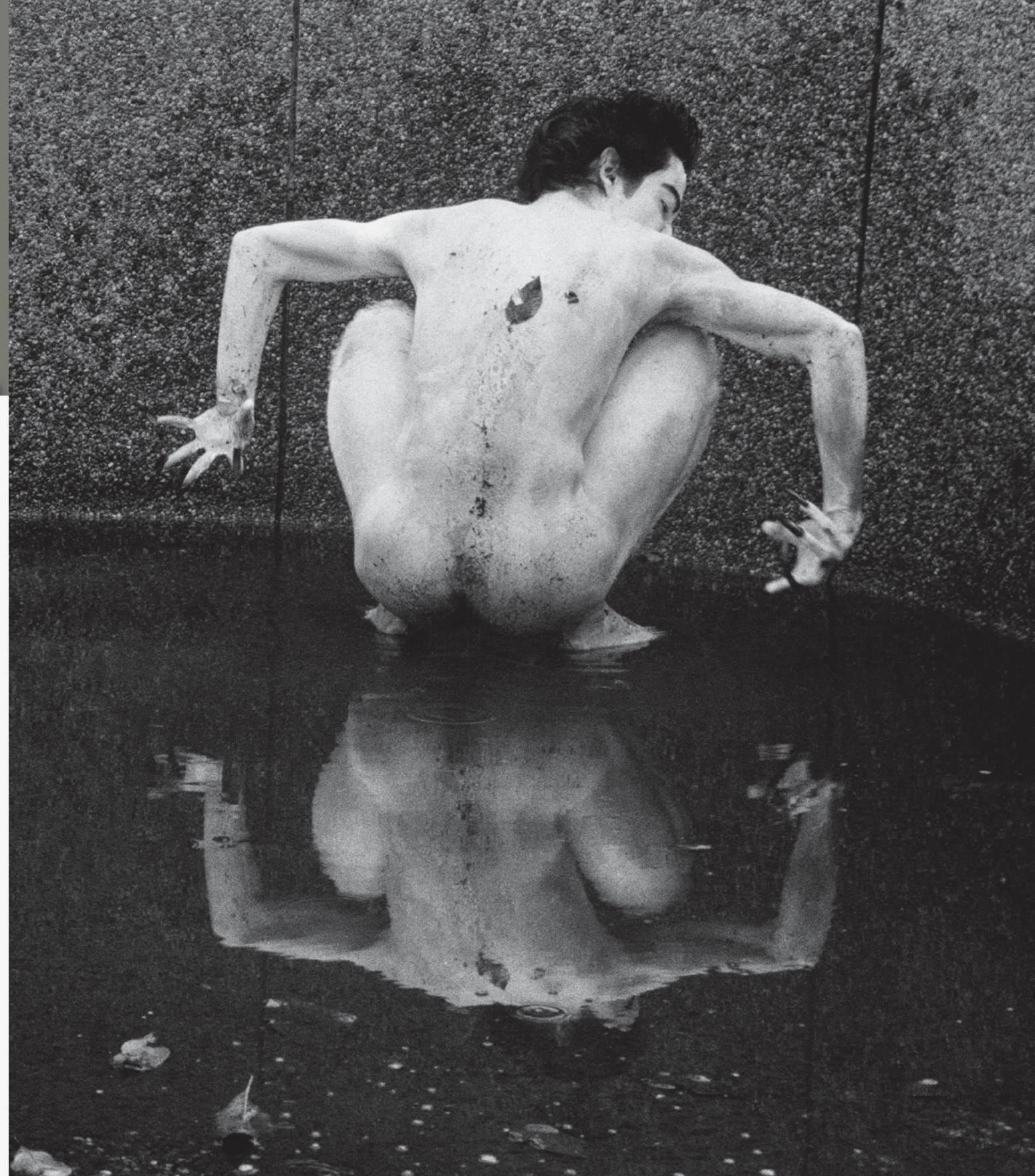


Carlos Motta Deviations

April 21 – May 21, 2016

Carlos Motta was born in Bogotá, Colombia in 1978 and currently lives and works in New York. His work has been the subject of solo exhibitions at the New Museum, New York; MOMA/PS1, New York; Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia; Tate Modern, London; Röda Sten Konsthall, Gothenburg; PinchukArtCentre, Kiev; and Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros, México City. He has also been included in group exhibitions at: Guggenheim Museum, New York; SF MoMA, San Francisco; Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona; Witte de With, Rotterdam; Jeu de Paume, Paris; and Castello di Rivoli, Turin. Motta was also included in the X Lyon Biennale; X Gwangju Biennale; Gothenburg International Biennale of Contemporary Art; International Film Festival Rotterdam; and Toronto International Film Festival. Motta has several upcoming solo exhibitions including Mercer Union, Toronto (April 2016); Pérez Art Museum, Miami (July 2016); Hordaland Kunstsenter, Bergen (August 2016); and MALBA-Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires (October 2016). Motta won the Main Prize-Future Generation Art Prize (2014), was named a Guggenheim Foundation Fellow (2008), and has received grants from Creative Capital (2012), Art Matters (2008) and Cisneros Fontanals Foundation (CIFO) (2006).

Untitled, 1998
archival inkjet print
30 × 45 inches (detail)





Untitled, 1998
archival inkjet print
30 × 45 inches



Untitled, 1998
archival inkjet print
30 × 45 inches



Untitled, 1998
archival inkjet print
20 x 24 inches



Untitled, 1998
archival inkjet print
20 x 24 inches

(next page)

Towards a Homoerotic Historiography, 2014
20 miniature gold and tumbaga washed silver figures
dimensions variable

installation view of the exhibition "Carlos Motta: For Democracy There Must Be Love"
at Röda Sten Konsthall, Gothenburg, 2015, photo by Hendrik Zeidler





Video still from *Deseos / تاب‌غر*, 2015
HD 16:9, video, color, sound
32'37"

Histories for the Future:

Visionary Identification in the Work of Carlos Motta

By David J. Getsy

Carlos Motta’s activist art grapples with history’s blindness to its own operations. He proposes new ways of inhabiting the past as means to engage with the present’s politics, emotional imperatives, and priorities. Any such revision of established history will be confronted with gaps and silences, and all searches for counter-narratives and alternate sites of sustenance must overcome legacies of erasure, redaction, and loss. Nevertheless, the quest to see the past differently is both meaningful and urgent. Partial evidence — or even a new way of interpreting the dominant story — can both give hope and fuel today’s actions and tomorrow’s envisionings.

In his collaborative oral history projects and in his poetic visualizations of forgotten ways of living, Motta addresses the structural and systematic erasure and subjugation caused by colonialism and its legacies.¹ This troubled history is confronted head on, and he works against it to recover the complexity of post-colonial subjectivities, sexualities, communities, and relations. His revisionism is lyrical and ambitious, and he conjures historical characters that are vivid in their resistance to the systems of political and cultural power that sought to locate and control them.

Motta creates moments of what one could call visionary identification. By this I mean that Motta’s works — his films especially — lean on imagination and fiction as they offer textured narratives of the lives of pre-Hispanic or colonial subjects. His characters are complex and full-blooded, and they exceed the historical narratives and protocols through which we, the contemporary viewers, struggle to see their particularity and difference. Such an imaginative revisionism is necessary because of the suppression of cultural distinctiveness that colonialism enacted. Motta’s work cultivates the barely surviving evidence of resistance to that subjugation and erasure, and he calls forth imagined communities and solidarities. In this way, his work makes larger claims about the ethical and political struggles of the present. By exploring the ways in which his characters and communities exceed and defy colonial

taxonomies, he offers narratives of survival and resistance with which today’s political subjects can identify.

Fiction is required in order to challenge the silences enacted through the systematic and structural erasure of cultural difference. Accounts of otherwise sexualities and lives survived colonial suppression only as traces, ghosting the archives. Those remnants — when they do appear — appear through the filter of the prejudices of the European colonizers. It was from the perspective of these imported laws and religion that the colonial governments policed difference and made sense of the people on which they imposed their rule and their worldview. Take, for instance, the archival account of Martina Parra that is a foundation for Motta’s film *Deseos / تاب‌غر* [Desires]. The film tells the stories of Martina and Nour, two women on different continents struggling with the legal and societal control over their bodies in the era of colonialism. Their letters to each other speak in voices both personal and political, and they establish a fictional transcontinental dialogue about oppression, determination, and opposition. Martina’s story is based on legal documents from 1803 found in the Archivo General de la Nación in Bogotá, Colombia, which give the colonial government’s record of their prosecution of Martina. The investigation was initiated by a spurious charge that she was intersexed and thus sinned “against nature” for being a “hermaphrodite.” Her story is tied up with the struggle against the physical violation and subjugation endured in this process — which was sparked by a false accusation from her female lover. That such a charge could be prosecuted (or even voiced as a negative aspersion) was due to the imported Christian anti-sodomitical laws that the Spanish colonizers imposed on the population.

If we were to rely on the archival documents alone, the story of Martina’s betrayed passion and endurance of violation would be heard only through the filter of the colonizer’s records of legal and medical proceedings. The isolation of Martina’s voice in the archive speaks strongly to those who find it, but its survival as the object of legal enforcement makes that voice faint and limits what it can say across the history into which it was written. Indeed, if it were not for the accusation and “aberration,” a simple, poor woman like Martina would not

have been registered in history at all. Motta refuses to settle for this, and he counters the erasure and caricature of this received history with his visionary identification with Martina. She is able to speak more clearly and loudly to the present because imagination and fiction have been used to overcome the erasures that are the effect of Enlightenment assumptions about rationality, evidence, and what counts as history.

[Deseos / تاب‌غر](#) goes further, however, by staging another such visionary identification between Martina and Nour. Located in Beirut (and then Damascus), Nour tells a different story of the struggle against law and custom. Nour marries her female lover’s brother in an attempt to find a way to save her love. While compelled to marry a man, their new familial ties allowed them to still be near each other, and Nour hoped for an alternate family made possible by the gender segregation that law and religion imposed on them. There are no archival records from which Nour’s story is excavated, but the fiction of her existence is rooted in historical and legal research just as much as it is in the leap of faith required to conjure from the silence of the archive this woman with agency, passion, and determination.

[Deseos / تاب‌غر](#) was co-conceived and co-written with Maya Mikdashi, an anthropologist from Beirut, who brought further research into the cross-cultural and historical dialogue staged by the film. The collaborative writing of the script paralleled the process of remote connection and exchange that is the film’s theme. Motta and Mikdashi connect the stories of these two women with each other as a means of imagining how knowledge of another’s struggle could allow one to go on. In its telling of their implausible but mutually supportive exchange, [Deseos / تاب‌غر](#) argues for the ways in which Martina’s and Nour’s voices speak critically by being reflected in (and being reinforced by) each other. Such individual stories of personal insurrection, defiance, and solidarity rarely make it into a standard history, but they are vital to those who also struggle to find modes of survival and solidarity. It may not be (all) historical fact, but [Deseos / تاب‌غر](#) speaks with conviction both to history and to the present for all that has been lost and all that remains to be done.

At one level, this effort is impossible, since there is no way to fully conjure another person from history, especially against the discursive weight of colonial trauma. The imagination of a past must be projective and speculative for this reason, but that does not mean we should not do it. The qualities of “accuracy,” “validity,” and “evidence” have been built up as inviolable by the Enlightenment tradition and its own fantasmatic construction of rationality. Not having evidence of something is the way Western modes of history reinforce the willful erasures of difference from its own records. This is born out in the history of homoeroticism, of which there is scant evidence because of its suppression and discursive intolerance.

These issues are also the theme of the series of sculptures Motta has created under the title [Towards a Homoerotic Historiography](#). The works are miniature reconstructions of surviving indigenous sculptures from across the Americas that represent homoerotic relations, communities, and traditions. Largely censored by traditional anthropology and museums (and destroyed by Catholic European colonizers), these traces of pre-colonial sexualities form an imagined community that, together, argues for the presence of other voices and possibilities lost to the colonial past. Often inaccessible to the public (or surviving only as a drawing or photograph), these objects were pieced together and made three-dimensional by Motta from the fragmentary archive. Using practices of sculptural reproduction and appropriation, Motta brings these traces to light so that they can speak more loudly together and with each other. Their diminutive scales visually register the precarity of these rare objects in archives and received histories. We cannot fully understand these source objects, and we can only see them at a historical distance as we struggle to make sense of their depictions of same-sex relations. Nevertheless, these traces remind us, at the very least, of traditions and lives that exceed the Western projection of the assumed category of heterosexuality onto pre-colonial cultures. Like [Deseos / تاب‌غر](#), the sculptures contend with the erasures of history in order to question how we, today, constitute our past and envision our future.

In this way, Motta’s work argues for the importance of revising history as a means of establishing new resources for present political struggles. Looking to the past and fighting with history’s colonial legacies and erasures is, in other words, an act of worlding that has political as well as epistemological urgency. Such practices articulate (and defend) new ways of living and of imagining communities and futures. It remains a common refrain to demand incontrovertible evidence of the homoerotic by those who deploy their privilege in adjudicating what is “real” and what is “reading into” in history. If they can’t see it, it must not exist, they argue. Such structurally conservative positions fail to grasp that the very lack of evidence or the slightness of what does remain are both the effects of discursive and actual violence. Sometimes, all that remains is the trace, the tale, the duplicitous mark, or gossip. Queer scholars have theorized gossip as resistance to structural erasure for precisely these reasons. Any evidence, they argue, is nevertheless evidence of survival and presence. Motta, too, makes urgent this search for traces of survival despite the structural and discursive weight of erasure. Visionary identification, in other words, is a way of reading into a flawed history in order to recast a feeling for the past and a strategy for the future.

In their imagined communities and visionary identifications, [Deseos / تاب‌غر](#) and [Towards a Homoerotic Historiography](#) extend the concerns of other, earlier works such as Motta’s [Nefandus Trilogy](#) (2013). Motta also has turned this practice inwards, re-viewing an early series of his own photographic self-portraits from the 1990s. Seeing himself at a historical distance, Motta has revealed these early works and put them in this context as means of thinking about a different, personal timescale. When he returned to these works after many years, he realized how they had unintentional resemblances to some of the sculptures in [Toward a Homoerotic Historiography](#) even though they had been created before Motta developed his research-oriented practice of historical imagination and revision. In the photographs, Motta experimented with the ways in which he could recombine and exceed the rigid binaries through which gender and sexuality were managed. These works complicate the reading of the sexed body, and their imagined characters strive to articulate positions outside of the

presumed taxonomies of gender’s relation to the body. In this, these works are in accord with the burgeoning critique of binary accounts of gender that emerged forcefully as a priority in the art (and especially photography) of the 1990s. Looking back to his own contributions to this moment, Motta encountered atavistic poses and emotional performances that appeared newly resonant to him through his intervening years of research into pre-colonial sexualities. The presence of these formal resemblances in the history of his own work, that is, evokes the kinds of excesses to which the surviving traces of colonial or pre-Hispanic sexualities attest.

In looking both to his own early self-imaginings and to the larger, conflicted legacies of the colonial policing of anything that exceeded the presumption of heterosexuality, Motta’s work demands that we look for capacities and possibilities that have survived – and that speak across – the erasures and suppressions of history. Such visionary retrospection argues that imagination and fiction are the necessary complements to historical and archival research in the effort to defy history’s erasures and prejudices. Motta looks to the past as a means to argue that it is politically and ethically urgent to cultivate and to protect such possibilities for identification and solidarity. It is in this way that both history and the future are remade.

David J. Getsy is the Goldabelle McComb Finn Distinguished Professor of Art History at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. His most recent books are [Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender](#) (Yale University Press, 2015) and the anthology of artists’ writing, [Queer](#), for the Whitechapel Gallery’s “Documents of Contemporary Art” book series published by MIT Press (2016).

1. These oral history projects include Motta’s [The Good Life](#) (2005), [We Who Feel Differently](#) (2012), and [Gender Talents](#) (2015)



Hermaphrodite (8) from Beloved Martina, 2016

(Modeled after one of the first intersex human pictures created in 1860 by French photographer Gaspard-Felix Tournachon, otherwise known as Nadar, who took nine photographs of a young person with a male build and stature, but who might have identified as female.)

Sandstone 3D Print

7.3 × 10 × 5.4 inches



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